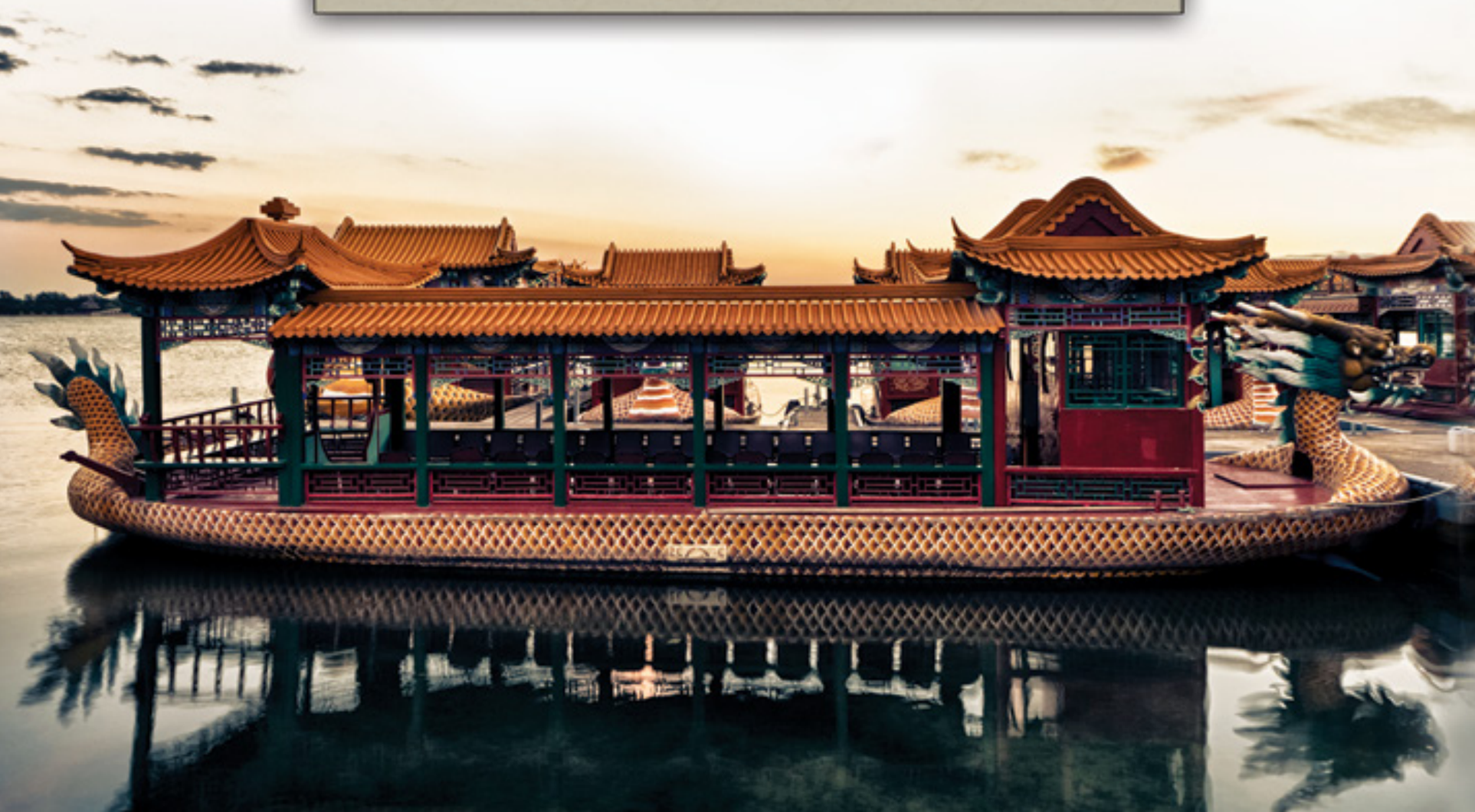
BEST OF

CHINA & JAPAN

Joji Hirota | The Silk String Quartet | Cheng Yu
Li He | Yamato Ensemble | Gong Linna...



CHINA

1. **THE SILK STRING QUARTET:** Autumn Moon over the Still Lake *(arr. Cheng Yu)*
The Silk String Quartet are: **Cheng Yu** – *pipa* (lute), *director of the Quartet;* **Sun Zhuo** – *guzheng* or *zheng* (zither); **Hu Bin** – *erhu* (fiddle); **Zhou Jinyan** – *yangqin* (dulcimer)

They profile the very best in Chinese musical talent in Britain and Europe, comprising four established virtuosi with international reputations. Silk String perform traditional music with their own interpretations, contemporary music and specially commissioned pieces as well as enjoying cross-cultural and creative music projects.

The Quartet's UK appearances include such venues as the Royal Opera House, the Royal Academy of Music, the National Early Music Centre in York, the Guildford International Music Festival… In Europe, the Quartet toured the Netherlands and performed at the Masala Festival in Hanover, Germany. Projects included a tour with the cellist Matthew Barley, a collaborative project with the Chamber Music Company, and an opera-circus spectacular, 'Monkey – Journey to The West' with Blur singer Damon Albarn.
For further information see *www.ukchinesemusic.com*

Autumn Moon over the Still Lake is an adaptation of a popular piece from the repertoire of Cantonese Silk and Bamboo (string and wind) ensemble music for the Silk String Quartet. This musical style is very popular in Canton as well as in the Pearl River Delta in southern China, in Hong Kong, and amongst Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. The piece demonstrates a style typical for the genre, with its soft and lyrical melodies and rich regional musical flavour.

2. **LI HE:** Wu Bang Zi *(Fen Zi Cuen)*
Li He was born in Beijing, China. He began to play the flute at the age of nine and made his stage debut at the age of fourteen. Between 1981 and 1983 he was enrolled in the Chinese Academy of Music. While studying in Japan in 1987, he successfully organised Chinese musical concerts. In February 1987, he was invited by the Overseas Broadcasting Channel of the BBC to participate in a live concert for world broadcasting along with famous Chinese musicians such as *Chen Dacan* and *Cheng Yu*. His work has greatly helped the promotion of Chinese music.

Wu Bang Zi is a popular tune often adapted for local operas. It is a set of variations in rhythm, tempo and dynamics and illustrates different techniques of flute playing.

3. **HAN SHIN CHINESE FOLK & DANCE ENSEMBLE:** Spring Dawn at Yang-Ming Mountain *(trad.)*
In 1991 Ms. Yu Yueh-shuo founded the *Han shin Chinese Dance Ensemble* which was the first dance company in the Changhua county of Taiwan. The ensemble has its own complement of musicians playing the traditional dance music. The ensemble's mission was to train excellent dancers in central Taiwan and to preserve genuine traditional Chinese folk dance and to present the elegance of Chinese dance to the world.

Under Ms. Yu's artistic direction the dancers and musicians of the *Han shin Ensemble* took part in many performances in Taiwan and in over 30 countries worldwide. The ensemble has won numerous awards and first prizes for "Best Choreography", "Best Technique", "Best Director", etc., at various festivals and competitions.

Ms. Yu has received many prizes of distinction and honour for her continuous effort to preserve and forward Chinese traditional dance, and in 1998 was granted an audience by the President.

Spring Dawn at the Yang-Ming Mountain depicts a beautiful spring dawn at the mountain, famous in Taipei for being very beautiful when everything is in bloom. The Chinese bamboo flute imitates the voices of the birds.

4. **CHENG YU:** Dragon Boat *(trad., arr. Cheng Yu)*
Cheng Yu is an internationally renowned *pipa* and *qin* virtuoso, and former soloist at the China Central Orchestra of Chinese Music in Beijing. She attained BMus (Xi'an Conservatory of Music, China), MMus and PhD (SOAS, University of London) degrees in *pipa* and *qin* performance and in ethnomusicology. She is the founder of the UK Chinese Music Ensemble (1996), the London Youlan Qin Society (2003) and the Silk String Quartet (2006).

Born in Beijing, Cheng Yu studied the *Pudong* (South China) style of *pipa* from the age of seven and was later trained in the *Pinghu* (North-western) style. She also studied the *guqin* at the Xi'an Conservatory of Music and graduated with distinction in 1987. After winning the "Outstanding Pipa Player" award in China in the same year she was selected as a *pipa* soloist in the prestigious Central Orchestra of Chinese Music in Beijing. Since the 1990s she has been based in London where she teaches *pipa* and *guqin*.

Her pioneering project to recreate a five-stringed *pipa* which had been lost since the 8th century has won major awards from Women in Music, the Arts Council of England and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. For more details please see *www.ukchinesemusic.com*

Dragon Boat (folk style) is a well-known folk piece for the *pipa* from Southeast China. It depicts the exciting traditional annual festival of the Dragon Boat competition, which takes place on the fifth day of the fifth moon. The music features three gong-and-drum sequences. Each is followed by a popular folk song which represents three different teams. Finally, all the sounds blend together, taking the music to its climax.

5. **GONG LINNA:** Pan Ge – Riddle Song (Children's Songs from Guizhou No. 2) *(trad., arr. Lao Luo)*
Born in 1975 in Guiyang, Guizhou province (located in the South-west of China), Gong Linna first appeared on stage at the age of five. Since her early childhood she knew that she wanted to become a professional singer. She began her studies at the age of 16 at the Chinese Conservatory of Music in Beijing. From 1999 to 2005 she was a soloist at the Zhongyang Minzu Yuetuan, China's most renowned traditional music orchestra. In addition to many other awards, she won the Chinese National Singing Competition in 2000 as best female singer, including the Special Audience Award. Linna has performed as the soloist with many major Chinese orchestras. Today she is one of the most outstanding Chinese vocalists, showing an impressive ability to transform traditional vocal sounds into a contemporary art-form.

Pan Ge – Riddle Song (Children's Songs from Guizhou No. 2)
What eats flowers but never eats roots? What never rolls over when it sleeps? What sits cross-legged on rocks?
What stretches its nets from the corners of rocks?
Sickles eat grass but not roots. Stones sleep without rolling over. Monkeys sit cross-legged on rocks.
Spiders stretch their nets from the corners of stones.
What beats drums in the sky? What rises early to sing at dawn? What has teeth in its belly?
What has dots like eyes on its back?
The Lord of Thunder beats drums in the sky. Cockerels rise early to sing at dawn.
A grind-stone has teeth in its belly. The arm of a pair of scales has dots like eyes on its back.

6. **HEART OF THE DRAGON ENSEMBLE:** Spring Festival *(trad., arr. Jiang Li)*
This piece was recorded with the Heart of the Dragon Ensemble and musicians of the Beijing National Traditional Music Orchestra. The Beijing National Traditional Music Orchestra is a state-founded orchestra in Beijing. It is a combination of Beijing Film Orchestra and National Traditional Music Orchestra. All musicians of the orchestra are top professional soloists and experts in their professions and come from different parts of China.

Heart of the Dragon Ensemble: a UK-based professional Chinese musicians group which holds regular concerts and educational programmes throughout the UK.

Spring Festival – this song is popular in Hong Kong, Taiwan and northern China. Many Chinese New Year dances use this piece. The melody is a conversation between instruments and percussion.

JAPAN

7. **JOJI HIROTA & THE TAIKO DRUMMERS**: Harvest *(Joji Hirota)*

Joji Hirota, composer, Japanese *taiko* drummer and percussion player, *shakuhachi* player and singer. Hirota was born in Hokkaido, in northern Japan. He studied percussion and composition at the Kyoto Arts University and was invited to come to Europe as the Musical Director of the Japanese Theatre Company. Then he became the Musical Director of The Lindsay Kemp Dance Company which won the Time Out Award for the best dance company for their production of *Onnagata*, for which Hirota wrote and performed the music. Projects include the Birmingham Repertoire Company, Triangle Theatre Company, Mulan Theatre Company, Royal Shakespeare Company, TV work, wildlife TV series Survival, BBC drama, some commercial work, etc.

In the early 80s Joji Hirota founded the group *Joji Hirota and The Taiko Drummers*. The group currently has ten members and they are highly regarded as an established Japanese traditional and contemporary taiko drumming group. They have performed concerts all over the world, including recent concerts at WOMAD South Korea, Sri Lanka, in Belgium, Italy, Spain, Germany, Great Britain, Turkey, Croatia, USA and more. On 7 July 2007 Joji and his Taiko Drummers, along with approximately 100 British drummers, played for the opening of the "Live Earth Concert" at Wembley Stadium (London).

Harvest: in the autumn many harvest festivals are held all over Japan. Everybody celebrates, wishing for a long life and for each others' welfare and friendship. People sing and dance all through the night to traditional Japanese rhythms.

8. **AIKO HASEGAWA:** Kiso Flowing *(Aiko Hasegawa)*

Aiko Hasegawa began to learn to play the *koto* at the age of four and the *shamisen* at twelve from her mother. She then studied koto with Masateru Ando. In 1987 she graduated from the Tokyo University of Music and Fine Arts. Together with Satoh Kikuko and Richard Stagg she founded an association called *'Yamato-Itotake'* and they released several albums with ARC Music (EUCD1717, 2399, 2497…). Aiko held a series of concerts all over Japan under the heading of 'Japanese Spirit – Koto Music Today'. She is a member of the Miyagi Concert Team.

Aiko Hasegawa has composed and arranged about 30 pieces. Her first work is *'Yamato'* (1989). One of her best known pieces is her arrangement of *'Auf Flügeln des Gesanges'* by Mendelssohn.

Kiso Flowing was composed to accompany the song *'Kiso Flowing'* written in 1993 by Aiko's father-in-law, *Hasegawa Masamitsu*. The River Kiso flows from the mountain range in the central part of Japan into the Pacific Ocean.

In spring, with the snow in the mountains melting, the river grows faster and wider. It enriches the lives of the people along its banks. The music mirrors the river. It expresses the narrow stream of icy water in the beginning gradually growing to a wide river. The introductory part is full of energy whereas the part which is meant to accompany the singing is quieter. The lyrics express the changes of the four seasons and the beautiful scenery in the plains where the river flows sedately towards the sea. In this album the koto plays both the melody of the song, as well as the accompaniment.

9. **RICHARD STAGG:** Kumoi jishi (Celestial Lion Dance) *(anon.)*
Richard Stagg has been a professional orchestral *flute*-player for the last thirty-five years, working in the Scottish National Orchestra and then in the BBC Symphony Orchestra in London, from which he recently retired. In the early 1980s he was a pupil of the late *Iwamoto Yoshikazu*, and has been studying the *shakuhachi* and performing on it for thirty years. He now teaches shakuhachi and also makes, repairs and tunes instruments. He regularly performs on the shakuhachi in Japan. With *Aiko Hasegawa* and *Kikuko Satoh* he co-founded the Yamato Ensemble in 1988.

Kumoi jishi – Celestial Lion Dance: Lion-dances were a popular feature of festivals and carnivals, and originated in China. Kumoi means heaven, cloud or sky, and may allude to the court of the shogun, where music was provided by koto-players.

10. **YAMATO ENSEMBLE:** Seoto (The Roar of the Shallows) *(Michio Miyagi)*
The Yamato Ensemble: **Kikuko Satoh** – *koto, shamisen, jiuta song;* **Yuko Naito** – *koto, jushichigen, jiuta song;* **Mika Kimula** – *soprano;* **Richard Stagg** – *shakuhachi, shakuroku*

Michio Miyagi was born in the Japanese city of Kobe in 1894. The family moved to Incheon in South Korea in 1907. Korea was a Japanese colony, with a substantial presence of Japanese officials and their families. Because of an eye defect in infancy Miyagi became completely blind at the age of eight. From childhood he learnt to play koto, shamisen or sangen, shakuhachi and singing. His virtuosity on the koto led him to invent the seventeen-string koto (jushichigen) in order to expand downwards the compass of the standard thirteen-string koto. He started composing as a teenager, at a time when he was already having to teach in order to help support the rest of the family. In 1917 they moved to Tokyo.

His style as a composer grew out of the late Edo Period tradition, but also out of the more diverse influence of the Meiji Era, when foreign practices were being rapidly absorbed and imitated. Eight years after the end of World War II he visited Europe and eagerly portrayed his experiences in new compositions, but still within the harmonic and stylistic framework inherited from Nineteenth Century Japan. We can only speculate on how his music might have developed if his life had not been cut short, at the age of 62, by a railway accident.

Seoto (The Roar of the Shallows) (Kikuko Satoh – *koto*; Yuko Naito – *jushichigen*): the scene portrayed is the town of Maebashi (by the bridge) in the mountainous Gunma district. The piece is a colourful impression of the Tone river (pronounced 'tawnay'). The use of the jushichigen (17-string koto) reminds us that this is no mere tinkling brook, but a powerful torrent. Its rapids are portrayed in kumoi joshi tuning. This is a common scale in koto music, and shares the mood of a European minor scale, but with no deliberate atmosphere of sadness. The calm and deep pools are represented by yo onkai tuning, which is Common or Chinese Pentatonic. A daring European scale of F major appears (descending from stone to stone, perhaps) leading us into the new key of C (devoid of 4ths and 7ths, i.e. pentatonic) where the accompaniment to the tune resembles a balalaika. This was 1923, and the young Miyagi was as eager as ever to embrace Western influences.

11. **JOJI HIROTA:** Kokiriko Bushi *(trad., arr. Joji Hirota)*
For info about Joji Hirota see track 7.

Kokiriko Bushi: This lyrical, beautiful folk song comes from Shinto music and dance of the Toyama prefecture in the northwest of Honshu Island. It was used as a working song to help farmers, planting their rice fields. At celebratory occasions people still perform it in the traditional style with costumes and dancing.

12. **TOMOE-RYU YUTAKADAIKO:** Shutsujin – Daiko (Departure to the Front – Drum) *(Yoshinori Itagaki)*
The group was started in 1994, but its beginnings go back to 1992. The original performance had been directed by Mr. Kozo Watanabe, under the supervision of the drum performer Mr. Yoshinori Itagaki, who performs with the Hakodate Japanese Drum Team.

The motto of the group is *"Drum sounds strike your heart"*. They aim to improve drum techniques as well as to further students' healthy minds and bodies and overall wellbeing. They also do charitable work through drum performances and aim to enlighten as many people as possible as to the beauty and fascination of Japanese traditional drum music.

Today there are forty-one members, each between sixteen and eighteen years old. Thirty members participated on this recording.

Shutsujin – **Daiko** (Departure to the Front – Drum) [Instruments: *taiko, horagai* (shell horn), *dora* (gong)]: four hundred years ago, there was a period of wars. Drums were played to boost the morale of soldiers who left their homes to go to war. The drums depict the scene of departure for the war with the sounds of the *horagai* (shell horn) and *dora* (gong). This piece is played in a form called "Shutsujin – daiko", special to Tomoe-ryu Yutakadaiko.

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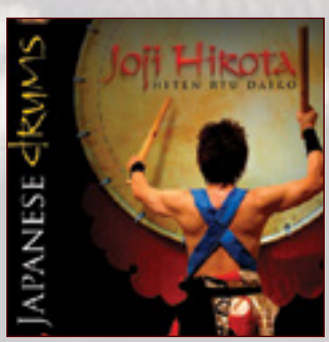
Total playing time: 63:37 min.



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